

"NOTES" FOR A MARXIAN SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION:

IMPLICATIONS FOR A CRITIQUE AND PRAXIS

- presented by: Donald L. Boisvert
(Department of Religion - Concordia
University)

Jennie M. Hornosty
(Department of Sociology, University
of Saskatchewan)

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(The following summary indicates some of the questions to be raised).

Until quite recently little attention was paid to Marxist analysis in the sociology of religion. However with an upsurge of revolutionary activity in the Third World, the emergence of a Marxist - Christian dialogue, and the development of "protest movements" within Christianity there is a greater openness to appropriating the Marxian critique of religion - both as a tool of analysis and as a guide for social action. This is especially evident in Liberation Theology and the "Christians For Socialism" movements.

The key to a Marxian sociology of religion lies in Marx's theory of the relationship of ideology to the social relations of production. He writes: "The production of notions, ideas and consciousness is from the beginning interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of human beings, the language of real life. The production of men's ideas, thinking, their spiritual intercourse, here appears as the direct efflux

of their material condition." For Marx, ideas, religious or otherwise, are social products and consequently religious activity must be viewed in relation to man's particular socio-historical condition. Religion functions differently in different circumstances.

Also central to a Marxian sociology of religion is the dialectical relationship of theory and praxis. As E. Bloch writes: "The ultimate and enduring insight of Marx is that truth does not exist for its own sake but implies emancipation and an interpretation of the world which has the transformation of the world as its goal." A Marxian critique insists that contemporary Christianity must seriously reflect on the role of man's activity in transforming the world. It raises the question of how oppressed classes can find in religion a tool for their emancipation. A Marxian analysis demonstrates that religion is more than theory, but also includes actions.

Marx showed that the dominant classes attained hegemony through the domination of the ideological apparatus. He states: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance." The dominant ideas include religious ones, consequently religion can become a manifestation of class domination and one of the instruments for reinforcing this domination. A Marxian critique focuses on the ideological function of religion - does religion legitimize the class position of privileged groups, or can religion play a potentially revolutionary role. Religion must

always be examined in concrete social historical situations in terms of its ties with different social classes. As Roger Garaudy says: "The thesis that religion as such, at all times and places, diverts man from action, from working and fighting, is a flagrant contradiction of historical reality."

G. Gutierrez affirms that contemporary theology does in fact find itself "in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism", and that it is to a large extent due to Marxism's influence that theological thought has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and the action of man in history. Camilo Torres, Latin American sociologist and guerrilla-priest states:

"There is no question that we are heading towards a society built on socialist structures. But as far as I am concerned, this development doesn't necessarily coincide with the philosophical bases of either socialism or Marxism. Yet, beyond a shadow of a doubt, there are only two forces in the world today that are in the position to lead the revolutionary changes, for they are the only ones that have a world view: Christianity and Marxism. When a revolution has a Marxist bent, it only shows our inability to give the right directions. In such cases, our mission is not to take a blind opposition against it. Just the very opposite: we must cooperate and participate in the revolutionary process while upholding our basic Christian values. And we must work together, all of us who are struggling along the revolutionary path."

A Marxian sociology of religion must, of necessity, have as its ultimate goal the exposure and demise of religion as artifact, as "the logic of an illogical world". However, the form religion will assume is a post-capitalist and indeed, a post-socialist society remains very much an open question - one which will only be answered at the level of praxis.

My purpose in this brief discussion is to raise some (and only some) of the issues which the student of religion must be concerned with in elaborating a truly imaginative Marxian sociology of religion. I propose to do this under three general headings: 1. The Creation of a New Ethics,

2. The Struggle with the Transcendent and 3. The Encounter with Death. It must be noted that I am speaking here of three human activities: creation, struggle and encounter. Religion is, after all, a dynamic. It is man in relation.

1. The Creation of a New Ethics. In terms of the analysis of the structural crises of capitalist society, Marxian thought provides one with the most comprehensive and sophisticated tool available. When Marxism and religion meet, an interesting process of creative confrontation occurs. I submit this is the point at which a much-needed new human ethics can come into being.

2. The Struggle with the Transcendent. All religions are permeated with a sense of what is best described as "the transcendent", whether perceived in terms of a special personality or in terms of a state or a force. In Marxian thought, the notion of "transcendence" is problematic. A delicate yet profound question for the Marxian sociology of religion is the degree to which the Marxian perspective can, in fact, accommodate a sense of "the transcendent". Everything may well hinge on this uncertainty.

3. The Encounter with Death. One of the important functions of religion is to make sense of death - to provide a language and an imagery which will aid the lone individual to integrate the fact of death into his or her life experience. For at its deepest level, the encounter with death is the encounter with the naked self. Marx does not provide any sort of clear philosophical statement on death. Yet the Marxian sociology of religion cannot escape dealing with it.

Why a Marxian sociology of religion? It is above all a matter of urgency. With capitalist society increasingly in crisis, we should be able to discern the new creation - the new society and the new man - which will rise from the impending wreckage. Religion is prophetic. What it contains as the ideal must now be transformed into the actual. The Marxian sociology of religion provides the analysis. The committed believer makes it happen.